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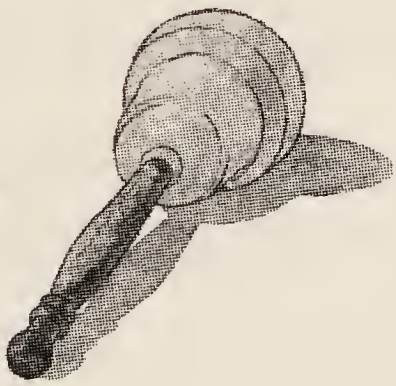
An important case

"I was just thinking," said the Little Angel of Acceptance, looking at her hands, "I was just thinking that I still have a lot of feathers to earn and a child who hangs around the library is probably pretty cooperative so this will probably be a pretty easy assignment so it would make sense for some little angel who only needs a few more feathers to take this assignment." She took a moment to catch her breath. She looked up at the archangel. "So you better pick someone else."

The Archangel of Acceptance smiled. "Don't worry. This will be a tough case; you'll earn a lot of feathers. And it's a very important case. I choose you, little angel."

Aladdin Angelwings №12

New Voices



Donna Jo Napoli
illustrations by Lauren Klementz-Harte

Aladdin Paperbacks
New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

Thank you to all my family,
Brenda Bowen, Karen Riskin, and Richard Tchen

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For Eva, who listens to the animals

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Angel Talk

"Come along, little angel." The Archangel of Acceptance held out her hand. "It's time for you to earn the rest of your feathers."

The Little Angel of Acceptance took the archangel's hand and smiled up at her from under her broad-brimmed hat. "I can't wait. Where are we going?"

"To the library."

"The library?" The little angel dropped the archangel's hand. "Why?"

"That's where the child is."

The Little Angel of Acceptance shook her head. "Uh-uh," she said.

"What's all the fuss about?" The archangel tapped the brim of the little angel's hat. "It

isn't unusual for a child to go to the library."

"I was just thinking," the little angel said, looking at her hands, "I was just thinking that I still have a lot of feathers to earn and a child who hangs around the library is probably pretty cooperative so this will probably be a pretty easy assignment so it would make sense for some little angel who only needs a few more feathers to take this assignment." She stopped a moment to catch her breath. She looked up at the archangel. "So you'd better pick someone else."

The Archangel of Acceptance smiled. "Don't worry. This will be a tough case; you'll earn a lot of feathers. And it's a very important case. I choose you, little angel."

The Little Angel of Acceptance studied her hands. She cleaned dirt out from under her thumbnail.

The archangel held out her hand again. "Let's go. I can't wait to find out what kind of bell will ring when you get enough feathers to

finally earn your wings." She smiled. "I'm sure it will sound lovely."

The little angel wanted to hear that bell ring; she wanted to earn her wings and become an archangel so that she could guide little angels, too. And she did want to help this child—she did. "Can we wait until the child leaves the library?"

The Archangel of Acceptance shook her head. "I thought you liked libraries."

"Not really." The little angel smiled uneasily. "I like museums."

"Maybe you'll change your mind. Come on. Here we go."

The little angel closed her eyes and when she opened them, there were shelves and shelves of books all around her. She sidled up against the archangel and looked around for a child in need.

A girl sat on the rug nearby with her knees bent and her ankles crossed. She leaned forward and rested her chin on her palms, her

elbows on her thighs. The book in front of her on the floor showed a picture of a tiger with lots of words below and beside it. The girl turned the page. Another tiger stared out at her.

The little angel moved closer and looked over the girl's shoulder at the fierce, striped face.

The First Librarian

"Time to go, class." Theodore spoke softly, but his voice carried.

TJ looked up briefly from her book. Theodore stood by the circulation desk and held up his right hand. TJ liked him. He was the only teacher she'd ever had who asked the children to call him by his first name. It made TJ feel almost grown up. Well, she'd just finish this page, then she'd go to him.

Children gathered from all over the library and formed a line in front of Theodore. TJ was aware of them as they whisked by. She knew they were filing past Mrs. Ford, the librarian, and checking out their books. She read faster.

Theodore tapped TJ on the shoulder. "Come on, TJ. Get in line."

TJ got up, still reading, and joined the end

of the line. She read as the line moved forward. Pretty soon she was at the circulation desk.

Mrs. Ford swatted her ear and looked around. "Is there a bee in here?" Then she shrugged and turned to TJ with a smile. "That must be a pretty good book."

TJ took an index card from her pocket and marked the page. She handed Mrs. Ford her book. "It . . . is," she said, with a pause between the words and an emphasis on the second word.

Mrs. Ford stamped the book and handed it back. "What makes it so good?"

"Tuh-tuh-tuh-tigers," said TJ. "I luh-luh-like tuh-tigers."

The class line broke into groups as they walked the corridor back to their classroom. Patrick fell back beside TJ. "You're a tuh-tuh-tuh-tiger." He talked loudly, and the kids in front of them looked back. Patrick laughed. "She sounds like a tiger, doesn't she?"

"She doesn't sound like a tiger at all," said Ari.

"Sure she does," said Patrick. "Tigers stutter, too. What do you think grrrr is? It's just one big stutter."

TJ's cheeks got hot. She wished she could let out a giant growl and scare Patrick. But she knew that if she tried, all that would come out was guh-guh-guh-grrr.

"Come on, tiger girl. Let's hear it," said Patrick.

By now three more kids had their eyes on TJ and Patrick. TJ knew they were there, even though she refused to meet their eyes. Her forehead got hot.

"You're so stupid," said Patrick. "Too stupid to even growl."

TJ bit Patrick. Right on the arm. Just like that. She clamped her teeth down and stayed there.

"Ahhh!" screamed Patrick. "Get her off me. Help."

Theodore came running. He wrested TJ off Patrick. "TJ! What's the matter with you? And, Patrick, what did you do?"

"Me?" said Patrick. "Don't ask me. TJ bit me." He rubbed at the white teeth marks on his forearm.

"Go on, class," Theodore said to the rest of the kids. "Go on to the classroom and we'll be there in just a moment."

Some of the kids wandered down the corridor. Others stayed put.

Theodore gave a little doubtful snort. "She just bit you?" he asked Patrick, holding each child by the shoulder. "Out of the blue?"

"Out of the blue," said Patrick.

"Tha-tha-tha-that's nuh-nuh-nuh-not true." TJ shook her head violently.

"Well, you did bite him," said Theodore. "You were still attached to his arm when I reached you."

"Buh-buh-buh-but . . . it . . . wuh-wuh-wasn't—"

"It wasn't out of the blue," said Ari.

"Patrick teased her," said Tammy. "Patrick was mean."

"He made fun of her stuttering," said Ari.

"No matter how mean someone is, you can't bite him," said Theodore. He let go of TJ's shoulder and lifted her chin up so that she had to look him in the face. "You know better, TJ. Don't ever let a bully get the best of you. He just wins if you lose control of yourself. Do you see?"

TJ didn't see. Patrick deserved to be bitten. And now maybe Patrick wouldn't tease her next time. But TJ nodded, anyway.

Theodore let go of Patrick's shoulder and lifted his chin up, too. "And you don't want to be the sort of person who bullies others. You don't want to make people feel bad."

"She bit me," said Patrick.

"I'm not talking about what she did. I'm talking about what you did. You know it wasn't right, Patrick. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then don't hurt people's feelings. No one likes a bully." Theodore stepped back. "Okay, now both of you say sorry to the other."

"TJ first," said Patrick. "She bit me."

"Both of you at once, on the count of three. One, two, three."

"Suh—" said TJ.

"Sorry," said Patrick.

"Suh-suh-suh-sorry," said TJ.

As TJ was putting on her backpack to go home, Theodore stopped her. "TJ, I have a letter here for your parents. Please take it to them."

"Shhhhhhure." TJ put the envelope in her pocket. She walked out to the bus, climbed on, and went to the very rear. She sat down and pulled out the envelope.

It was sealed.

What would Mamma do when she found out TJ had bitten Patrick? Mamma hated biting. She was always scolding TJ's baby sister,

Annie, for biting. TJ should have been born a tiger, then she'd have an excuse for biting. Now she was going to get punished. It wasn't fair. Patrick was the one who should get in trouble. TJ hadn't even really hurt him—nothing like when Annie bit, with her razor-sharp little front teeth.

Had Theodore told Mamma everything? Everything that mattered? Had he told about how mean Patrick was?

Had Theodore recommended a punishment?

TJ ripped open the envelope. She stuffed it between the back of the seat and the back wall of the bus. Mamma would never need to know the letter had come in an envelope. She read:

Dear Mrs. Silvers,

TJ has been under observation since the beginning of the school year. It is now clear that she would benefit from speech therapy. But before we can begin, we need your signature at the bottom of this letter

to show that you allow her to see Mr. Purnell, the speech therapist. As soon as I receive the signed letter, Mr. Purnell will call you to schedule an informational meeting. I look forward to working through TJ's problem with you.

Sincerely,
Theodore

TJ had been observed and she hadn't even known it. And now she'd have to go to speech therapy. Everyone would look at her. What was speech therapy, anyway?

TJ looked out the window. The bus stopped. And, oh, this was her stop. She ripped up the letter as fast as she could and stuffed it beside the envelope. Then she rushed off the bus.

Angel Talk

"I did my best," said the Little Angel of Acceptance. "I whispered in the librarian's ear. That's why she paid attention to TJ."

"Ah-ha," said the archangel. "I wondered why she kept brushing at her ear like that."

"But I didn't know TJ stuttered, then. I thought she was special because she's such a good reader."

"How do you know she's a good reader?" asked the Archangel of Acceptance.

"She doesn't have to keep her finger under the words. She can even walk while she's reading." The little angel's voice was wistful. She tilted the floppy hat on her head.

"Nice hat," said the archangel. "Is it new?

You were wearing a different one before."

"One of the kids in TJ's class threw it away when she was walking home. Can you imagine? And it's so beautiful. I love hats." The little angel smiled. Then she blinked. "Anyway, I shouldn't have bothered the librarian."

"Why do you say that?"

"TJ would have been better off if the librarian hadn't talked to her. I made a mistake."

"Don't worry about that," said the Archangel of Acceptance. "That's nothing. What are you going to do about the fact that she ripped up that letter? That's the real problem."

"Well, I think being made to say sorry was enough punishment."

"What do you mean?" asked the archangel.

"Her teacher shouldn't have sent home a letter. He already handled the biting incident. And TJ's so unhappy. The teacher has to know that. Only someone miserable would bite someone else."

The Archangel of Acceptance looked

confused. "The letter wasn't about biting."

"It wasn't?"

"Hmmm," said the archangel. "Did you even read that letter?"

"No," the little angel said sheepishly.

"Well, pay more attention in the future," said the archangel. "TJ needs you to be alert for her." She cleared her throat. "The letter said she should go to a speech therapist."

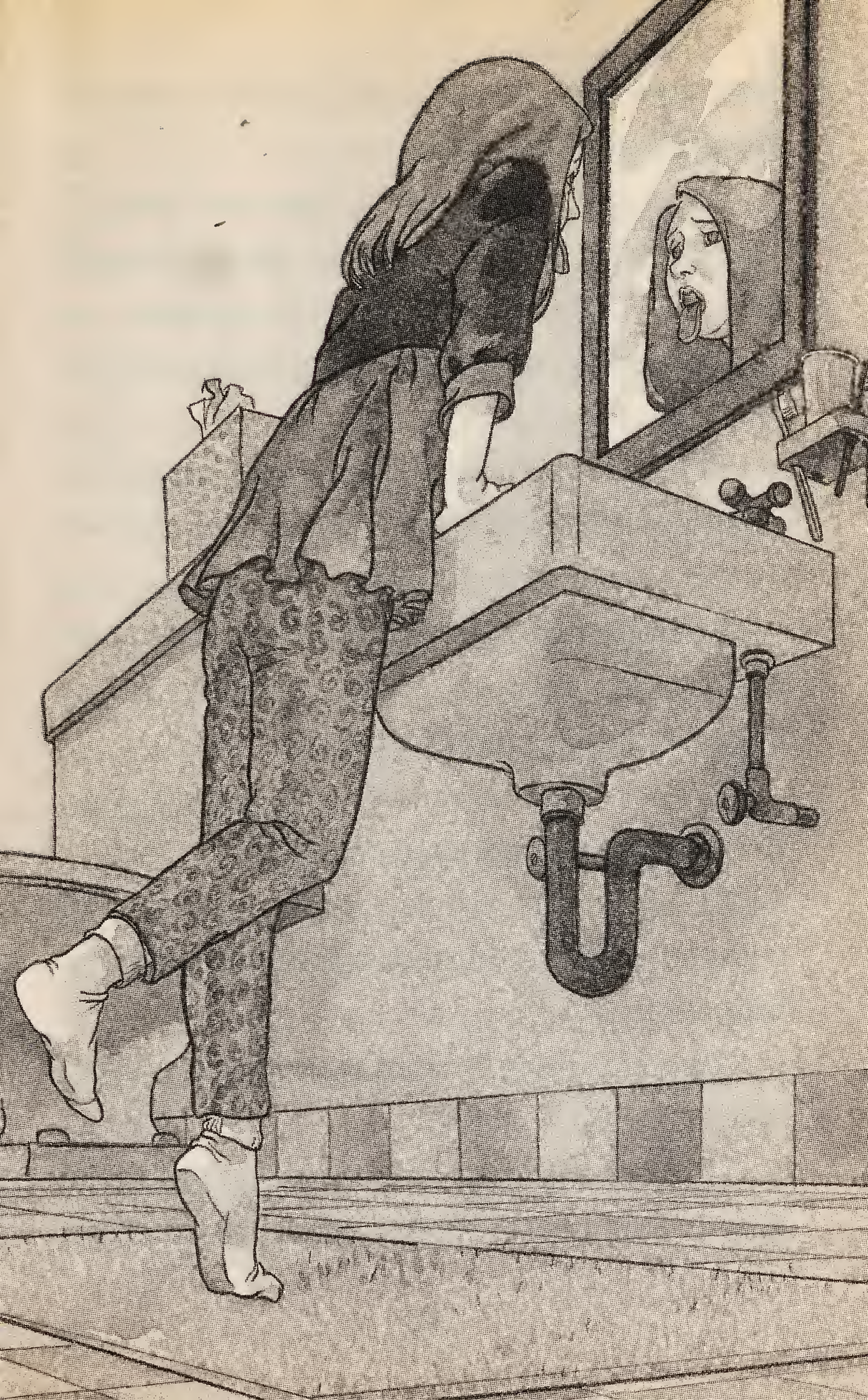
"And she ripped it up," said the little angel. "Oh, no. How will we get her there now?"

"That's your job," said the archangel.

Shhh

On Tuesday morning TJ stuck her tongue out at the bathroom mirror. She examined the top of it. She pointed it left, then right, so she could scrutinize the sides in the mirror. Then she pointed it toward her nose and looked at the underside. There was nothing wrong that she could see. TJ finished brushing her teeth. Mamma was busy in Annie's room, changing her. Daddy wasn't awake yet. TJ tiptoed downstairs, grabbed her backpack, and left.

TJ liked to walk to school because Mamma allowed her to buy a doughnut at the grocery along the way. The grocery sold doughnuts only at breakfast time. TJ usually bought one sugared doughnut, took one big bite, then said, "Wow," to the grocer before waving good-bye. "Wow" was an easy word because if



she stuttered, it just sounded like she was emphasizing the word.

But today was different. For one thing, TJ was extra hungry because of skipping breakfast. She walked briskly into the grocery.

The grocer handed her a sugared doughnut. "Here you go."

TJ took it and pointed at a glazed doughnut.

"Two? All right, then." The grocer handed TJ the second doughnut.

TJ smiled at him and laid her money on the counter. Then she took a giant bite of the sugared doughnut and waved.

"What's the matter with you today?" said the grocer. "Cat got your tongue?"

TJ left, munching on doughnuts. A bite of sugared, a bite of glazed, a bite of sugared, a bite of glazed.

"Good morning," called the school-crossing guard. "How's it going?"

TJ licked her fingers clean and smiled at the guard. This guard always asked the children

the same question. And since there were usually a group of children crossing together, TJ never had to answer. But today TJ got to the crossing before anyone else, and the guard was looking expectantly right at her.

"It's a good day to be in school." The guard laughed. "What grade are you in?"

TJ held up her fingers.

"Hmm. Something wrong today, honey?" said the guard. "Tongue-tied?"

TJ crossed the street and waved good-bye. She was early, but she decided to skip the playground and go straight into her classroom, anyway.

Theodore was arranging his desktop. "Hi, TJ. Do you have a letter for me from your parents?"

TJ shook her head.

Theodore smiled. "That's all right. Try to remember to bring it tomorrow, okay? I need it."

TJ went to her desk and got to work on drawing a scene from the book Theodore had

finished reading to the class the day before. Whenever Theodore finished a book, everyone was supposed to draw a favorite scene. TJ drew a huge spiderweb in the corner of a barn door, right near a pigsty.

Soon the other kids came in, and the school day began. Patrick passed TJ's desk and whispered, "That's the scene I was going to draw. You copied."

TJ wanted to ask how she could have copied when Patrick hadn't drawn his yet. But she kept her mouth shut.

Patrick put his hand on TJ's desk. "Are you deaf or something? I just talked to you."

TJ looked up at Patrick, standing in the aisle, and bared her front teeth like a tiger.

Patrick withdrew his hand fast and ran to his seat.

The morning went pretty well, with painting in the art room, and a short math quiz, and a lesson on African drums in the multipurpose room, where everyone actually got

to stand up and dance. TJ was good at all three. Then recess time came.

TJ wrote, "Can I go to the library during recess time?" and put it on Theodore's desk.

Theodore looked at the note. Then he looked at TJ. "Well, sure. I guess so."

So TJ pocketed the note and went to the library. She sat on her favorite spot on the rug and finished reading her tiger book. Then she turned it in and checked out a book on dangerous cats. It had a long chapter on tigers.

Mrs. Ford batted at her ear again. She looked around every which way. Then she lifted her eyebrows and let them drop. "Oh, TJ. It's you, two days in a row. You're really getting into felines, is that it?"

TJ pointed at the sign: SHHH.

Mrs. Ford gave a small smile and whispered, "You're right. Sorry. Happy reading."

TJ went back to class, clutching the book to her chest.

Angel Talk

"Something's going on," said the little angel. "Why did she sneak out of the house this morning?"

"And why didn't she say anything to the grocer and the school-crossing guard?" asked the Archangel of Acceptance.

"And most of all . . . " The Little Angel of Acceptance wrinkled her nose. "Most of all, why would she choose to go to the library over going out to recess?" She played absentmindedly with the feather on her newest hat. "I think all those things are connected."

The archangel nodded. "I bet you're right. Somehow the library is a better place for TJ right now than home or recess."

"Of course! No one talks in the library. TJ's

not talking anymore." The little angel looked up at the archangel. "That's it, isn't it? She doesn't want to go to speech therapy, so she's refusing to talk at all."

"Poor child. That's why she looked at her tongue in the mirror. She thinks her tongue is the problem."

"Maybe it is," said the little angel. "Oh, tongues! Oh, yes!"

"What is it?"

"I know someone who knows all about tongues," said the little angel. "I just thought of her."

"All about tongues?" The Archangel of Acceptance laughed. "Who is this strange person?"

The little angel grinned. "You'll see."

The Visiting Librarian

TJ managed to make it through lunch without talking. Then came reading time. TJ got tense. But when it was her turn to read aloud, she simply started coughing and she didn't stop. Theodore gave her a cup of water and told her to relax while he went on to the next child. He never did make it back to TJ.

At afternoon recess, TJ used the same note she'd used that morning to get Theodore to allow her to go to the library instead. Theodore hesitated at first, because the whole class was going to the library right after recess for a special program. But TJ just looked plaintively at Theodore, and he relented. As she walked down the hall, she opened her dangerous cat book and read. But

when she got to the library, instead of quiet, she found a crowd.

A woman she'd never seen before stood on the rug where TJ liked to sit. Behind her was a cart covered with a black sheet. On top of the cart were three boxes. The woman was showing something to a group of little kids, who surrounded her. TJ recognized Tammy's little brother Danny. So this must be the kindergarten class, she thought. TJ joined the group at the outer edge. What was that woman holding?

It was feathers. The woman identified the bird the feathers came from and told a few things about it, then she passed around a few of its feathers. The kindergarteners talked excitedly. In fact, they talked so loudly that they would surely disturb anyone who was trying to read. TJ looked quickly at the circulation desk. Mrs. Ford was busily putting books on the cart for reshelving. She didn't look upset at all. Maybe the library was

changing its policy, and everyone was going to be as noisy here as they were everywhere else.

TJ looked back at the woman with the feathers. The woman took another handful of feathers from the first box. These were a different color and a different size. She explained that they came from a scarlet tanager.

TJ walked over toward the circulation desk. Beyond it was a window onto the parking lot. TJ could see a trailer parked there. In big letters above the door of the trailer were the words SCIENCE MOBILE. TJ had never heard of a science mobile before.

She wove her way through the shelves of books to the corner of the library most distant from the noisy kindergarteners and sat down on the floor to read. Before long, she was totally engrossed in her book.

After a while she had the strange sensation of being watched. She looked up and almost brushed noses with the new woman,

who was leaning over her.

"Hello. That's my traveling science mobile that I saw you looking at out the window."

TJ smiled at her. When the woman didn't say anything else, TJ went back to reading. But the woman didn't go away. TJ looked up at her again.

The woman was brushing at both her ears. When she saw TJ looking at her, she laughed apologetically. "My ears have been funny for the past day and a half—it's like there's a tiny voice I can't quite hear. Maybe I need to see a doctor." She turned her head sideways to get a good look at TJ's book. "How interesting—all those wild cats. Are you a budding zoologist?"

TJ did love animals. She nodded.

The woman smiled. "You looked so content over here, I just had to come see what you were reading. Books are wonderful to curl up with, aren't they? Hmmm." She put her hand to her cheek. "You've given me a great idea." She went back to the circulation

desk and talked with Mrs. Ford.

Moments later TJ's class filed into the library, on schedule.

Theodore motioned for TJ to come over and join the class. They all sat on the rug looking at Mrs. Ford and the new woman, who stood in front of her cart.

Mrs. Ford clasped her hands together. "We have a special surprise treat. Mrs. Collo, the curator of collections at the science museum, has come to talk with us. Our school wasn't supposed to get a visit this year, but last night the name of our school just popped into her head. So she called me up and offered to come. See how lucky we are? Let's all give her a warm welcome."

Everyone clapped.

Mrs. Collo smiled sweetly. "Thank you. I'm happy to be here. How many of you have gone to the science museum in the past year?"

Some of the children raised their hands.

"Good for you. I bet you saw a lot of wonderful collections." She rubbed her hands together as though she were warming them up. "Now would any of the rest of you like to see collections of feathers from exotic birds, or rocks that came out of volcanoes, or different kinds of snake skins?"

Everyone nodded.

"That's what I thought. All of you would love the collections we have at the museum, but only some of you get to go there. So that's why I bring our collections to schools. I'll be here for the rest of the week and I'm going to meet with every class in the school." She smiled. "Today I'm going to show you a collection, and we can all talk about it. But that's not all." Mrs. Collo glanced over at TJ and winked. "I'm not just a visiting curator this week, I'm going to be a visiting librarian—but only for the classes that see me at the very end of the school day. Like you." She beamed.

TJ looked around. Everyone seemed as

confused as she was. She looked back at Mrs. Collo.

"Everyone can check out something from the collection we discuss. That way you can get to know it a lot better at home. It'll be just like checking out a book. But the difference is that you have to bring it back tomorrow morning at the start of the school day so that I can show it to other classes tomorrow. Okay?"

The children nodded again.

"That's very important. This is the first time I've ever loaned my collections. It's an experiment. And if you don't bring things back promptly in the morning, I won't be able to loan them out anymore. Does everyone understand?"

The children nodded more vigorously.

"All right, then, which collection do you want to learn about? Feathers or rocks or snake skins?"

Almost everyone wanted snake skins.

"Who thinks snakes are slimy?"

"I do," shouted several people.

"Well, I have a surprise for you. The skin of a snake is clean and soft." Mrs. Collo opened one of the boxes and took out a long brown empty skin. "I'm going to pass this around. It's not soft anymore because it's empty. But when it was on a live snake, this skin felt like smooth, cool rubber. Please be very careful not to rip it. We have to treat all our collections delicately. This is the skin of one of the most venomous snakes of all: the cottonmouth."

Mrs. Collo talked on and on while the children passed around snake skins. Then they got in a line to check out the snake skins overnight.

TJ watched the first kids in line make their choices. She had wanted the rattler skin—it was the best because the tip of the tail was attached and it actually rattled when you shook it—but Danny got it. And Ari got the

cobra skin. So it didn't really matter which skin TJ got—all the rest of them were pretty much alike. TJ joined the back of the line right behind Tammy.

When TJ got her turn to look into the box of snake skins, Mrs. Collo suddenly jerked her head this way and that. Then she scratched her forehead with a confused look on her face. "Oh, it's you," she said when she finally noticed TJ. "Which do you like better, snakes or wildcats?"

TJ blinked at Mrs. Collo.

Tammy looked back over her shoulder. "TJ loves tigers."

"Tigers? Well, that is a coincidence." Mrs. Collo whispered in TJ's ear, "TJ, if you come here right after school, I'll show you another collection. It has something from a tiger."

TJ put back the snake skin she had chosen. What could Mrs. Collo show her? Tigers didn't have feathers. Maybe she had

a collection of furs? TJ went with her classmates back to their room and waited for the school closing bell to ring. Then she picked up her backpack and ran to the library.

Mrs. Collo met her at the door. "I may have spoken too fast, TJ. I was sort of carried away by the coincidence between your loving tigers and my having this . . . well, this special thing in a collection of . . . well, of special things." She looked uncomfortable. "I don't know what got into me."

TJ waited.

"Tsk. Now I've got you curious, and I don't want to disappoint you." Mrs. Collo looked hard at TJ. "This collection is something I usually show only to the older grades, the grades where they dissect animals. In fact, I have no idea why I brought it to this school. I'm doing strange things today."

TJ stood as tall as she could, so that she'd look older.

"I'm not sure you'll like it. Children always call it gross," said Mrs. Collo.

The idea of seeing something gross excited TJ. She stretched even taller.

"Now look at you; you look so hopeful. Hmmm. Do you really want to be a zoologist?"

TJ nodded.

"You'll need to develop a strong stomach for that." Mrs. Collo looked thoughtful. Then she gave a little gasp. "TJ, I just realized you haven't said a word to me. Don't you talk?"

TJ shook her head.

"Well, that does it. I think this collection might be very special to you. Are you ready?"

TJ gulped and stepped forward.

"Take a peek." Mrs. Collo lifted one side of the black sheet that covered the cart.

The cart had three shelves on it.

Every shelf was filled with jars.

TJ looked closely. Every jar held a tongue.

TJ jumped back. Her breath came hard and fast.

Mrs. Collo dropped the sheet, so that the jars were covered again. "Are you okay?"

TJ took a step and carefully lifted the sheet again. She stared at the jars. Some of the tongues were bumpy, and some had several shades of color, and some were skinny and long.

"These are all from different animals." Mrs. Collo ran her finger slowly across the jars. "Yes, this one is the tiger tongue." She handed the jar to TJ.

TJ held the jar at eye level. She couldn't take her eyes off the tiger tongue. It was huge.

"Would you like to check it out overnight?"

TJ nodded.

"All right, then. Enjoy it."

Angel Talk

"Just how do you know this Mrs. Collo?" asked the archangel.

"She works at my favorite museum. I know all her collections."

"So that means you knew about the tiger tongue." The Archangel of Acceptance put one hand on her hip. "And you whispered the name of TJ's school in her ear."

"Of course." The Little Angel of Acceptance took off her baseball cap and threw it in the air. She caught it with a flourish. "Wasn't that a great idea?"

"A great idea?" The archangel looked doubtful. "What's she doing, giving TJ a tiger tongue?"

"It did seem yucky at first, didn't it?" The

little angel giggled. "But the more I looked at it, the more it didn't seem that yucky, but only interesting. I actually love Mrs. Collo's special collections. I'm sure TJ will, too."

"That's not the point. It doesn't seem right for a child to be walking around with a tongue in a jar."

"Well, TJ does have an interest in tongues," said the little angel. "Remember how she stood in front of the mirror this morning? And the tongue isn't hers to keep. She just checked it out overnight."

The archangel made a tsking noise.

"You sound like Mrs. Collo," said the little angel.

"I don't know about that Mrs. Collo. What kind of librarian lets children check out tongues?"

The little angel smiled. "A tongue librarian. Ha! I bet Mrs. Collo would laugh at being called that."

"I don't see how this has anything to do with helping TJ learn acceptance. At least if someone could get her to check out a book on stuttering, that might help her."

"I think a tongue is a lot more helpful than a book."

The archangel frowned. "And why is that?"

"Almost anything is more helpful than a book," blurted out the little angel. Then she looked away and picked at her nails.

"You know, little angel, I'm getting the feeling that it isn't just that you don't like libraries. It's that you don't like books."

"Never mind that," the little angel said quickly. "I'm getting another idea. And I bet this tongue is just what TJ needs."

"Just what she needs for what?"

"I'm not sure yet. But give me a chance. Please." The little angel squeezed her hands together in excitement.

"Of course you can have a chance. This is your task, little angel."

The Tiger Tongue

TJ took the bus home. The whole way she held the tongue jar safe inside her backpack perched on her lap, where no one would see it and ask what it was.

As soon as she got in the front door, she ran to her bedroom and held the jar up to the light. She examined the tongue from every direction. It was large and thick and rough and dark. And somehow it was mysterious.

Something tickled the hairs inside TJ's ears. It was almost as though there were the tiniest little whispery noises. She flicked at her ears. But the noises didn't stop. Maybe she was getting the same illness Mrs. Collo had.

"TJ?" TJ's father rapped his knuckles on TJ's door. "Hurry up. You have a dentist appointment. Did you forget?"

TJ opened the door. "Hiss." She jumped. That sound came out of her mouth.

TJ's father looked at her. Then he shook his head and picked up the car keys. "Come on. Your mother's at toddler swim with Annie. I promised her I'd get you to the dentist on time."

TJ wanted to lock herself in the bathroom and try to figure out what the hiss was all about. But Daddy was in too much of a rush. She ran out to the car.

The dentist was downtown, but fortunately TJ's father found a parking place right away.

TJ ran ahead of Daddy into the dentist's office.

The receptionist smiled at her. "Just a little late. That's okay, though, because the doctor is running behind. Let's set you up in the chair."

TJ followed the receptionist into the examination room. She settled herself in the chair.

The receptionist clipped a bib around her neck and gave her a cup of water to rinse with.

TJ rinsed and waited.

Dr. Bacon came in. "Hello, TJ. How about you open that mouth wide?"

TJ opened her mouth. "Grrr."

"Ahh!" Dr. Bacon dropped his metal tooth probe. "What did you say?"

"Grrrr," said TJ. Oh, no!

"Stay right there." Dr. Bacon left the room.

TJ tried to call him back. But all that came out of her mouth was snarls.

Dr. Bacon came back in with Daddy.

"What's going on, TJ?" asked Daddy.

"Grrrr." TJ pleaded with her eyes.

"Stop that."

TJ sat silent.

"Why are you making those noises?"

"Hiss," said TJ.

"I told you to stop it." Daddy turned to Dr. Bacon. "I don't know what's gotten into her.

She's usually a cooperative kid."

"That doesn't sound like cooperation to me," said Dr. Bacon.

TJ grabbed Dr. Bacon's hand and squeezed. The dentist had to understand that it wasn't her fault.

Dr. Bacon looked alarmed. "Don't get upset now. Let me see inside that mouth again."

TJ opened her mouth. A snarl escaped. She pointed frantically at her tongue.

Dr. Bacon's hand shook, but he shined his little flashlight all around inside TJ's mouth. "Well, I can't really see anything strange, but she seems to be indicating that her tongue has problems, and perhaps it does look a little odd."

"What do you mean?" Daddy came forward. "Let me see, TJ."

TJ opened her mouth again. "Grrr." She stuck out her tongue.

Daddy shook his head. "To tell the truth,

I don't know how her tongue usually looks. What's wrong with it?"

"Maybe nothing. But it seems a little thick. Does it hurt, TJ?" asked Dr. Bacon.

"Grrr."

"Don't try to speak. Just nod your head yes or shake it no."

TJ shook her head.

"Hmmm. Don't worry about it. But just to stay on the cautious side, I think you should make an appointment with your pediatrician." Dr. Bacon tapped his fingers above his top lip. "How about we postpone her dental checkup until this is cleared up?"

On the way home TJ pulled her jacket over her head so Daddy couldn't hear, and she experimented. But no matter how hard she tried, all that came out were snarls, hisses, and growls.

Angel Talk

The Archangel of Acceptance did not look happy at all. She glowered at the Little Angel of Acceptance. "What's going on, little angel?"

"It looks like her tongue is behaving like a tiger tongue," said the little angel.

"I saw TJ flicking at her ears. You whispered to her, just like you've been whispering to the librarians, didn't you?" The Archangel of Acceptance shook her head ruefully. "I think you've enchanted TJ."

"I only suggested she try having a tiger's tongue for a while."

"Why on earth would you do that? Now everyone thinks the poor child is ill. And she's scared."

The little angel's eyes filled with tears. "I didn't mean to scare her. And I didn't really think she'd be unable to do anything but growl. I didn't know she had such a good imagination."

"Well, now you know. So you have to change your ways."

"But I have such a nice plan," said the Little Angel of Acceptance. "It might work if you don't make me stop."

The archangel slowly shook her head.

"Please."

"Well, all right. But be very careful. TJ's worried enough that having speech therapy will make the other children think she's odd. If they hear her snarling like a tiger, it will be much worse."

"I'll be careful. No more tiger tongues."

"No more tiger tongues? What does that mean?"

"You'll see."

The archangel pointed at the little angel.

"TJ has two legs, not four. She doesn't need any more cat tongues. Okay?"

"Okay." The little angel shifted her baseball cap so that the visor pointed off to the side. "Don't you love this baseball cap? I think it's great. I've thrown away my other hats and I'm going to wear it all the time from now on." She didn't look at the archangel.

"You're trying to change the subject. But I mean it. No more cat tongues. And no dog tongues, either. And no sheep or cows or horses. Do you get my drift? Nothing like that."

The little angel finally looked at the archangel. "Okay. But you have to allow me a little leeway. I'm trying to teach TJ a lesson."

The Archangel of Acceptance sighed. "Accepting your methods is a lesson for me."

The little angel smiled. "Do I get a feather for that?"

"Absolutely not." Then the archangel's face softened. "But if this plan of yours works, you'll get plenty of feathers."

Tongue #2

On Wednesday morning, TJ ran to school, holding her hand tight on her mouth so the growls couldn't pop out. She didn't even stop at the grocer's for a doughnut. She went directly to the parking lot of the school. Thank heavens the science mobile was parked exactly where it was supposed to be. TJ knocked on the door.

Mrs. Collo opened the door. "TJ, it's you. And so early. Oh, my. You don't look happy at all. What happened?"

TJ snarled.

Mrs. Collo's eyes went wide. "You sound just like a tiger." She stared at TJ. Then she looked at the jar with the tiger tongue. "Are you trying to pretend like you have a tiger tongue?"

TJ shook her head.

Mrs. Collo frowned. "I heard a snarl, TJ, loud and clear."

TJ took a piece of paper from her pocket and wrote on it, "I can't stop. All I can do is make tiger sounds."

"Oh. Oh, dear. Well, come on in." Mrs. Collo offered TJ a chair.

TJ went inside the science mobile and sank into the chair.

"Can you explain to me how this happened?"

TJ shook her head and handed Mrs. Collo the jar with the tiger tongue.

Mrs. Collo walked back toward her cart, in the corner.

TJ followed at her heels.

"You can wait in the chair. I'm just going to put the jar away."

TJ followed.

"What do you want, TJ?"

TJ pointed at the jars.

"Another tongue?"

TJ nodded.

"Well, I suppose that's okay. I'm certainly not going to show the tongue collection to any other classes in this school." Mrs. Collo picked up a jar and looked at the label on the bottom. "Here's a nice pig tongue."

TJ imagined herself oinking. She shook her head.

"Well, what do you think of this one?" Mrs. Collo handed TJ a jar.

The tongue in the jar was small, like TJ's own tongue. But it was darker and it had a nice upward curl at the tip. TJ held the jar over her head so she could read the label. Oh. She took the jar.

For the rest of the school day, the tongue sat hidden in TJ's desk, and TJ did everything she could think of to avoid talking. She nodded and smiled and pointed her way through every situation.

When Theodore asked if she'd brought in

the note from her parents, she lowered her eyes and pretended to be embarrassed. He patted her on the head gently and said it could wait for the next day.

After school TJ leaped off the school bus, ran into the house, and went straight to her bedroom. She took out the jar and examined the tongue. It was a very nice tongue. Smoother than the tiger tongue. But still mysterious. She held the tongue jar up close to her ears and listened hard. This tongue held so much promise. TJ was determined to learn from it.

"TJ?" her mother called. "I have to go to the corner grocery. Would you come with me to help out with Annie?"

TJ ran to Mamma. She loved pushing Annie in the stroller.

Mamma smiled at her. Annie was riding on her hip. Annie drooled happily at TJ. Then Mamma's eyes clouded a little. "Any more growls?"

TJ shook her head.

"Well, good. I knew it was nothing." Mamma put Annie in the stroller, and all three of them walked to the grocery.

The grocer came toward them with a smile. "Hello there. I missed you this morning, TJ. You skipped your doughnut." He didn't see the banana peel on the floor.

TJ let out a shriek.

"What?" said Mamma.

TJ shrieked again. She pointed at the banana peel and jumped in place.

But by this time the grocer had already fallen.

Angel Talk

"Why did she shriek?" asked the archangel in alarm.

"You'll see," said the little angel. "That's just the start."

"I'm not entirely happy with this Mrs. Collo," said the archangel. "Her tongues aren't very nice."

"Yes, they are. They're interesting. She's got all kinds."

The Archangel of Acceptance put one hand on her hip. "You promised me this wouldn't be another strange creature's tongue."

"You said no cats or dogs or anything with four legs. Well, the creature this tongue comes from walks on two legs," said the little angel. "Just like you and me."

"Someone who shrieks like that? Oh, no. This can't be good."

The Little Angel of Acceptance laughed. "Yes it is. Very good. Just wait."

The Zoologist

When Daddy walked in the door, Mamma practically jumped on him. "TJ's shrieking and making blubber noises with her lips."

"What are you talking about?"

Mamma held Annie in her arms and pointed. "Listen to her."

Daddy looked at TJ. "So?"

TJ lifted both arms high over her head with her hands hanging limp at the wrist. She ran around the room whooping.

"Enough." Daddy put up his hand in the halt sign. "TJ, this is serious now. What's going on?"

TJ looked at Daddy. She scratched her ribs with both hands at once.

Daddy looked at Mamma. "Do you have any idea what she's doing?"

"No, but I think it's an animal again. A different kind. And this time it isn't just noises—TJ's behaving strangely." Mamma held out a piece of paper to Daddy. "She might be able to help us."

Daddy read the paper. "Dr. Partee. Who's that?"

"A zoologist at the university."

Daddy looked doubtful. "Do you really think a university professor will care about TJ's problems?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything. But when I called the pediatrician, he said that TJ is probably just pretending to be one animal after another. And the best person to talk her out of it would be a zoologist. So I called the university, and Dr. Partee said she'd be happy to meet TJ. She's in her office right now."

"Well, then, what are we waiting for?" Daddy opened the front door.

TJ loped into the kitchen and took a yam

from the bin. Then she loped back, and they all climbed into the car.

Dr. Partee's office was in an old wooden building that looked like a strong wind could blow it down. But Dr. Partee herself turned out to be tall and strong looking, with bright blue eyes and a big smile. "So you're TJ?"

TJ smiled, but something funny happened to her lips.

"TJ!" said Mamma. "Don't just show your bottom teeth like that. That's rude."

TJ tried to explain that she was being friendly, but all that came out was a series of little squeaks.

The zoologist blinked. "Are those the only noises you can make?"

TJ shrieked and whooped and wailed.

"My my." Dr. Partee sat on the edge of her desk and swung her legs in excitement.

A bit of dried food stuck to Annie's shirt. TJ picked it off. Then she picked off the dried

food from Annie's arm. And from her cheek. Now she searched around in Annie's hair with both hands.

Mamma swatted TJ's hands away. "Stop that."

"My my," said Dr. Partee. "TJ's grooming your baby."

"Grooming? Annie doesn't need any grooming," Mamma said defensively.

Daddy pointed. "Go sit on that chair, TJ."

TJ went over to the chair and climbed up. She squatted there.

"Not that way," said Daddy. "Sit normally."

"It's okay," said Dr. Partee. "Let her do what she wants to do." She stared at TJ.

TJ pulled the yam out of her pocket and took a bite.

"TJ," Mamma said weakly, "that's raw."

Annie reached her hand toward the yam and drooled.

"Chimpanzee," Dr. Partee said, clapping her hands together in victory.

"What?" said Mamma.

"What?" said Daddy.

Annie laughed.

"There's no doubt about it," said Dr. Partee. "TJ has adopted all the mannerisms of a chimp." She looked at Mamma and Daddy. "Have you been spending a lot of time at the zoo?"

TJ didn't talk on the way home. What point was there? No one in her family would understand her. None of her friends would understand her.

Angel Talk

Chimpanzee? Little angel, you are a sneak."

"No, I'm not," said the Little Angel of Acceptance. She took off her baseball cap and brushed off the top of it. "Chimps have only two legs."

"A technicality. And stop playing with your hat. You have to face me, little angel."

The little angel put her baseball cap back on and looked up at the archangel.

The Archangel of Acceptance sighed. "Your methods are far from orthodox." She scratched her elbow worriedly. "This doesn't seem like angels' work to me."

"Why?"

"For heaven's sake, little angel, the girl's

acting like an animal. The next thing you know she'll be swinging from trees."

The little angel stepped close to the archangel and looked up into her face. "I don't think so. TJ looked unhappy to me. I think she misses sounding like other people."

"Well, who can blame her?" The archangel kept scratching her elbow. "TJ has to return that tongue tomorrow, you know. And then all she'll have are the sounds her own tongue makes."

"Tomorrow's only Thursday. There's still time to check out one more tongue." The little angel smiled entreatingly.

"Another tongue?" The archangel scratched faster. "I don't like this tongue idea."

"Just one more. Please. I think TJ's on the verge of a breakthrough."

The archangel stopped scratching and folded her arms across her chest. "All right. But no jungle animals—no matter how many feet they have."

The little angel chewed at the skin around her thumbnail. Then she brightened. "All right."

"You have another crazy idea, don't you?"

"Who, me?"

Tongue #3

On Thursday TJ loped slowly and hung her head all the way back to the science mobile. The visiting librarian opened the door just as she was about to knock. She took one look at TJ's sad face and led the way to the cart.

She held out her hand.

TJ gave her the jar with the tongue.

She looked at the label on the bottom. "What happened?"

TJ pointed at her mouth.

"Don't tell me, you started making squeaks like a chimp?"

TJ squeaked.

"Oh, that is bad. I mean, I suppose it's better than snarling like a tiger all the time." Mrs. Collo looked at TJ's forlorn eyes. "But not much better, I guess."

TJ felt a tickle in her ears. She stuck a finger in each ear and twisted it back and forth, to scratch it.

"Is something wrong with your ears now, too?"

TJ shrugged. Then she pointed at the tongue jars.

"Oh, no. You want another tongue?"

TJ nodded.

"Well, then, this time you'd better pick. My last two suggestions were terrible disasters."

TJ looked at all the tongue jars. There must have been dozens. TJ felt overwhelmed. Her heart beat hard. Her mouth went dry. She wanted a tongue. A good tongue. One that wouldn't embarrass her. One that she could read aloud in and answer questions in and even tell jokes in. She needed a decent tongue. She took out a piece of paper and wrote, "A tongue that can make human sounds."

The visiting librarian nodded. "I don't

have human tongues. But, when I come to think of it, there is one tongue here that can sound almost human." She tapped on a jar.

TJ picked up the jar. The tongue inside was tiny and pointed. TJ read the label: MOCKINGBIRD.

TJ went straight to the library and checked out a book on birdcalls. Then she decided to skip school.

TJ had never skipped school before. But, then, she'd never growled like a tiger before or acted like a chimp before. These were desperate times. She needed to know right away what the new tongue would sound like, and she didn't dare test it at school.

She went home, reading the book as she walked. She opened the front door.

Daddy sat in the living room. "TJ, what are you doing home?"

TJ waved to her father and rushed to her bedroom. She took out the tongue jar and studied it. Her ears tickled ferociously.

"TJ? What are you doing in there?" Daddy

hesitated. Then TJ heard his footsteps going away.

A few minutes later she heard, "TJ?" This time it was Mamma. "Daddy feels like he needs a breather. So he's taking a work-at-home day. Maybe you need a break, too, what with all this animal stuff coming out of your mouth. Won't you come out, dear?"

TJ came out.

Mamma stood there, clutching a dish towel. Daddy stood behind her. Annie crawled at their feet.

"We're having a great big breakfast, TJ," Daddy said cheerfully. "I know you had cereal just a little while ago, but cereal is nothing compared with what I'm going to make now. What would you like?" He led TJ into the kitchen. "A stack of pancakes?" He went right to the stove. "An egg with toast?"

A cardinal whistled outside the window.

TJ whistled back.

"I didn't know you could whistle like that." Daddy put the frying pan on a burner. "So was that a whistle of appreciation at the thought of a fried egg?"

The neighbor's dog barked.

TJ barked back in a lilting kind of way.

Daddy grabbed Mamma by the hand. They both stared at her. "What did you say?"

"What," sang TJ, "what what what?"

"Waaa," Annie sang from her high chair.

"I don't understand," said Mamma. "Who are you now?"

"Who," sang TJ, "who who who?"

"It's at least English," said Daddy.

"Glish glish glish," sang TJ.

"Stop singing," said Daddy. "You sound like a bird."

Annie clapped.

TJ went back to her room. For the rest of the day, she lay in bed with chirps and caws and sweet melodies playing in her head.

Angel Talk

The archangel shook her head. "Do you realize, little angel, that you haven't earned a single feather yet in this particular task?"

"That's not entirely fair," said the little angel. "I've been working very hard to help TJ."

"Oh, I know you've been working. What I'm not convinced of is whether or not any of this is going to help her. And I have to say that I'm not at all pleased with how you find ways to get around my rules. You know very well that I didn't want TJ to sound like any kind of animal, not even like a bird that can mimic other animals." The archangel reached into a fold of her robe and pulled out a book. "Here. I went to the librarian yesterday, the regular librarian, not

the tongue librarian, and I got you this book."

"A book? For me?" The Little Angel of Acceptance stepped backward in fear.

The archangel laughed. "It's not a snake or a scorpion. It's a book. Read it."

"What's it about?"

"The title tells it all."

The little angel glanced at the letters on the cover of the book. Then she looked away.

"What's the matter? This is exactly the book you need to figure out how to help TJ."

The little angel took a deep breath. She blinked back tears. "I can't read," she whispered.

"Oh." The archangel gathered the little angel into her arms. "Oh, I didn't know. I should have guessed. I'm sorry."

The little angel stood quiet, pressed warm against the archangel, breathing her sweetness and trying to relax the tightness in her chest.

"What's the problem?" asked the archangel in a quiet voice.

"I don't know. I'm just very slow at it. I've tried and tried." The little angel wiped away a tear. "Finally, I gave up. I've never told anyone till now."

"It sounds like you need a special teacher."

"I'm not stupid."

The archangel went down on her knees, so that her face was lower than the little angel's face. "I didn't say you were stupid. If that's what you think, it's your own mistake. Lots of people have trouble learning how to read. But with the right kind of help, they manage. You will, too, little angel. You need a reading teacher who's trained to help you."

"Do you know one?"

"Yes."

The little angel looked at the book. "What's it about?"

"Stuttering."

"I really do like libraries," said the little angel, running her hand over the book cover. I'm just embarrassed. But I love it when people

read to me." The little angel took a deep breath. "I'm going to learn to read," she said with determination. She smiled at the archangel. "I'll go to the special reading teacher you know and I'll learn. But TJ needs help now. And I think I can give it to her without this book. In fact, I think she's almost there. Trust me. Please let me finish what I've planned."

The Archangel of Acceptance got to her feet. "You're right. Help TJ now. Get back to work, little angel."

Friday

TJ was covered with sweat by the time she got to the science mobile on Friday. She had run all the way.

The visiting librarian handed her a handkerchief to mop her brow. Then she took the jar and quickly led TJ to the cart. "So you didn't like singing all the time, is that it?"

TJ shook her head.

"But at least with a mockingbird tongue you can mimic the sounds of everyone around you. You can sound just like them if you want."

TJ pointed at the jars.

"I'm sorry, TJ. It's Friday. This is my last day. You can't check out any more tongues."

TJ looked at Mrs. Collo with desperation on her face. She pressed her lips together to hold in the misery.

"Please don't be so upset. Oh, TJ, the museum has so many tongues, I suppose I could give you one, as a gift. If you really, really want it."

TJ looked at Mrs. Collo. She was amazed at her generosity. Then she looked at all the tongues. Each of them held a certain voice. She could have any of those voices. Forever.

If she really, really wanted it.

But did she? What good would it do TJ to growl or squeal for the rest of her life? And it wasn't any better with the mockingbird tongue, because TJ didn't like being able to say only what others said first.

A few days ago TJ had hated her own tongue. It never seemed to do what she wanted it to. But, really, it said what she wanted—just with a lot of trouble.

TJ shook her head. "Nuh-nuh-nuh-no thuh-thuh-thanks." She shook Mrs. Collo's hand. Then she walked out of the science mobile and straight to her classroom.

"TJ, you're here early today," said Theodore. "I missed you yesterday. Were you sick?"

TJ was sort of sick yesterday. Heartsick. She nodded.

"Did you bring in a note?"

TJ handed Theodore the excuse note Mamma had written. "Buh-buh-but I need another luh-luh-letter about spuh-speech therapy."

"Oh, you lost that letter, did you?" Theodore smiled kindly. "I sort of thought so. So I already wrote another one, just in case." He handed TJ an envelope. "If your mother signs it this weekend, you can begin therapy next week."

"Thuh-thanks," said TJ.

Angel Talk

"Well," said the Archangel of Acceptance, "this tongue thing is finally over. And without disaster. At times you had me beside myself with worry, but I have to admit you knew what you were doing."

The little angel smiled. "Actually, I was pretty worried, too. TJ's imagination got out of control sometimes."

"So now you have to help TJ accept her own tongue."

"I know," said the little angel. "To start, I'll make sure TJ really shows up at speech therapy."

"You're right," said the archangel. "After she skipped school the other day, who knows what she's likely to do?"

"And then," said the little angel, "the very next thing I'll do is go to that reading teacher you told me about."

Speech Therapy

"Stuttering isn't a disease," said Mr. Purnell. "More than anything, we think it's a habit."

TJ nodded. A bad habit, she thought.

"And we've found that no particular exercises suit all cases. But what does help everyone is just talking. The more you talk, the less you'll stutter."

That was hard to believe. For as long as TJ could remember, she'd stuttered. And she'd certainly talked a lot in her life. She'd answered her mother and her father and her friends and her teachers. So much talking.

Mr. Purnell smiled. "I can see you're thinking about that. And maybe you don't believe me."

TJ felt herself blush. She hadn't meant to be rude.

"The point is to talk without worrying

about what you're saying. When someone asks you a question, you have to think of the answer. It puts you on the spot. You tense up, and that makes stuttering more likely. I'm not going to ask you questions. I'm simply going to listen to you." Mr. Purnell put a bell on the table. "Here's an ordinary bell. I'd like you to tell me about it. Say anything you want. Describe it if you want. Tell me what it makes you think of. Say anything. Just talk."

"It's gruh-gruh-gray. And muh-metal. And it rings." TJ laughed. "It rings." Wow, she had said that easily. She held up the bell and rang it loudly. "It rings."

Angel Thoughts

The newest Archangel of Acceptance looked up from her book. What a beautiful bell TJ was ringing. The sound was as wonderful to her ears as her new feathers were to her eyes. Her wings were now fully feathered and ready for flying. And she would fly, she would. But she wanted to read five more sentences first. After all, she was just getting the hang of this reading thing. She smiled at her reading teacher, turned the visor on her baseball cap to the rear, and continued the lesson.

tiger

chimpanzee

mockingbird

Meet the Little Angel of Compassion in the next Aladdin **Angelwings**

№13 Left Out

Molly walked toward the girls over by the swing set.

Celia looked up at her and said loudly, "Oh, hi, Molly."

The other three girls stopped talking and turned to face Molly. "Hi."

Molly knew immediately that they'd been talking about something they didn't want her to hear. She was used to that. Ever since her big sister had a baby, people hushed when she came near, and she knew they had been talking about her. But Celia was Molly's friend. How could Celia talk behind her back? Molly lifted her chin and smiled. "What's up?" she asked, as though nothing was wrong.

"Hey," said Celia.

"Let's go get a ball from the equipment shed and play basketball,' said Teresa.

"Yeah," said another girl. They ran ahead, leaving Celia and Molly alone for a moment.

"What were you talking about?" asked Molly.

"Nothing."

"Oh, sure. That's why everyone stopped when I came over." Molly stooped and brushed dirt off her shoe. She stood up again. "I wouldn't say anything behind your back, Celia. No matter what."

"It wasn't about your sister or the baby, I swear," said Celia.

"Then why can't I know?"

"Oh, okay." Celia looked away. "You know how the town pool is opening for the season on Saturday? Well, there's going to be a party at the pool."

"A swimming party? I love to swim."

"But you can't come," said Celia.

"Who says?"

"Beth's mother." Celia finally looked at Molly again. "She's the one in charge of refreshments. And you know how she is."

Molly knew, all right. Beth hadn't been allowed to invite Molly to her birthday party last fall. Beth's mother told Beth that girls who got pregnant in high school weren't nice and that Molly was probably going to turn out just like her big sister. And Beth told Molly. Beth stood there on the sidewalk in front of school and said those things. Molly's mouth went sour now, just remembering. "The town pool doesn't belong to Beth's mother. She can't keep me from coming and swimming. I can swim all day long if I want."

Celia touched Molly's sleeve. "Don't do that. You'll just feel awful."

Angel Talk

"I don't understand," said the Little Angel of Compassion. "You said I was supposed to help Molly, but it's Beth who needs to learn compassion. And Beth's mother."

"You'll have your hands full teaching Molly," said the Archangel of Compassion.

The little angel took out her harmonica from one pocket and a soft cloth from the other. She polished the harmonica. "You can't mean that you want me to teach Molly to feel compassion for the other girls. They're the mean ones, not Molly. They can't blame Molly for something her sister did."

"Oh, little angel, the task grows bigger and bigger. But start with Molly, okay? She does need you."

"I'll try. I don't know what I can do to help her. But I'll try.

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Donna Jo Napoli's books and stories are read all over the world. Her award-winning novels for young readers include *Soccer Shock*, *When the Water Closes Over My Head*, and *The Prince of the Pond*, among many others. She is the head of the linguistics department at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband and their children.

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